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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRAGUE 000681

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SUBJECT: CZECH INTERIM GOVERNMENT EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

Classified By: CDA Mary Thompson-Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The interim, technocratic government of Jan Fischer was appointed on May 8, 2009 by President Klaus, after Mirek Topolanek's ODS-led coalition government lost a vote of confidence on March 24. Topolanek and CSSD leader Jiri Paroubek agreed on Fischer, a previous unknown who headed the Czech Statistical Office, because he was politically obscure and perceived as malleable. Yet Fischer has proven his mettle as an effective, confident Prime Minister and has gained the trust and support of the public. ODS and CSSD contacts have verified that Topolanek, Paroubek and a small cadre of party leaders have met to discuss the possibility of holding early elections in February, instead of the regularly scheduled May 2010. While early elections in February are still unlikely, the fact of the meeting hints at the growing unease over Fischer's burgeoning popularity within the major parties. Despite his success as Prime Minister, Fischer's government is still very reliant on the support of both Topolanek and Paroubek. Regardless of the date of parliamentary elections, Fischer has proven a reliable ally and willing interlocutor who is willing to engage with the U.S. on a wide range of issues. End Summary.

Fischer's Interim Government

¶2. (SBU) No one had heard of Jan Fischer before CSSD and ODS presented him to President Klaus as their choice for interim Prime Minister. Klaus appointed the former Head of the Czech Statistical Office as PM on May 8, the day Mirek Topolanek resigned as PM. Fischer's government was comprised mostly of Ministers affiliated with the two major parties - CSSD and ODS. Fischer's initial goals and mandate were modest: finishing the Czech's EU Presidency, preparing the country's 2010 state budget and austerity package, moving forward with privatization of Czech Airlines, starting debate on the 2010 foreign deployments bill, taking on the extremist Workers Party and, of course, preparing the country for early elections.

¶3. (SBU) Fischer assumed the responsibilities of the EU Presidency with little difficulty. His performance was statesmanlike, although the Embassy noticed a definite shift in power and coordination from the Deputy Prime Minister's office (formerly led by Alexander Vondra) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From the announcement of the new government, Foreign Minister Kohout moved to transfer much of the responsibility for Summit preparations and substantive issues from Vondra's office to the MFA.

¶4. (C) The interim government has its critics as well, mostly from ODS. Previous Interior Minister and current ODS Vice Chairman Ivan Langer publicly sparred with interim Interior Minister Martin Pecina (loyal to CSSD), after Pecina changed the portfolio of the ODS number two at the Interior Ministry, Zdenek Zajicek, and limited Zajicek's ministerial authority. This prompted Zajicek to resign and Langer and Topolanek to call for Pecina's removal. Topolanek, known for his emotional reactions, said Fischer's government "could not

enjoy" ODS confidence while Pecina was still in office. Topolanek later retreated from this ultimatum. Fischer took a stately approach and completely defused the issue, saying he would meet with Pecina later to discuss changes at the Interior Ministry. Pecina remains as Interior Minister.

Now, Until the Next Elections

15. (SBU) Fischer's legislative accomplishments show that he was a confident leader and an astute politician. In May, respected security policy analyst Jiri Schneider told poloffs that the Fischer government would be lucky to get the 2011 foreign deployments bill through first reading, given the controversy surrounding the 2010 bill. However, Fischer gained consensus on and swiftly pushed through the 2011 deployments bill to completion. He did the same with controversial economic austerity measures necessary to meet the 2010 state budget cost saving goals. Fischer's Interior Minister, Martin Pecina, has ramped up the government's efforts to fight extremism, working collaboratively with the Human Rights Minister, Michael Kocab. Fischer publicly confronted President Klaus over Klaus's reluctance to sign the Lisbon Treaty. Currently, although only 1.8 percent of Czechs believe politicians, Fischer enjoys an approval rating of 79 percent, with more than two-thirds of the electorate wanting his interim government to stay in power until regular parliamentary elections occur.

16. (C) Despite his successes to date, Fischer has kept his government's priorities from now until the May 2010 elections

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modest. He selected a EU Commissioner who was acceptable to both the Civic and Social Democrats. He wants to move forward on the large (and controversial) environmental remediation tender, as well as Trade Minister Tosovsky's long-term energy policy. Fischer also seeks to present anticorruption legislation to the parliament, but may find this more difficult to push through parliament given the embedded special interests.

17. (C) Although the Fischer government appears stable for now, there will probably be some changes in the near future. Minister for European Affairs Stefan Fule was selected as the Czech nominee for the European Union Commission and must be replaced. A couple of names have been mentioned as his replacement; the most recent is the current Czech Ambassador to Australia, Juraj Chmiel. In addition, the Minister of Environment, Ladislav Miko, is slated to leave the government at the end of November. The Director of Policy at the Ministry of Environment, Pavel Sremer, told poloff that one of the Deputy Ministers will likely succeed him.

...Whenever That May Be

18. (C) After the deal for early elections in November fell apart, everyone geared up for May 2010. A recent leak in the press about meetings between CSSD and ODS leaders to discuss the possibility of early elections in February 2010 was confirmed by the Embassy in a telcon with Jan Hamacek, CSSD MP and party leader, as well as Chair of Foreign Relations Committee, although publicly denied by Paroubek of CSSD. (Comment: Hamacek is the more trustworthy of the two. End Comment.). Yet in the wake of the meeting, Hamacek said February elections were "unlikely" and President Klaus said they were not "realistic."

19. (C) Both Paroubek and Topolanek are becoming wary of Fischer's burgeoning popularity and are growing weary from the stress of a prolonged campaign. Paroubek in particular pays close attention to polls: reportedly, the Topolanek

government's rise in popularity during the first part of the EU presidency was one factor that motivated Paroubek to seek the confidence vote that brought the government down. Topolanek's ODS party will hold a party congress on the weekend of November 21 and 22, to vote on a platform. However, there have been numerous calls from other ODS party leaders to have a secret ballot on party leadership - that is, a vote of confidence on Topolanek. Topolanek refuses to allow it, but this grumbling could be the impetus Topolanek needs to push for early elections in February.

Reliable, Popular, But Mindful of His Place

¶10. (C) PM Fischer has been a strong ally to the U.S. and a willing interlocutor. His government's swift and smooth handling of the foreign deployments bill was impressive. His Minister of Defense, Martin Bartak, laid the groundwork with legislators from both ODS and CSSD so that all issues were ironed out prior to the vote. CSSD MPs noted that Fischer's handling of the foreign deployments bill was a bi-partisan success and in pleasant contrast to 2009, because Fischer addressed CSSD's concerns up front and gave them no reason to entrench.

¶11. (C) Fischer's government has been a reliable, cooperative partner for the U.S. Despite being told that Czech interlocutors would be consulted days before an announcement of our decision on the security review policy and missile defense, Fischer's handling of the late-night call from President Obama hours before the decision was announced was gracious and statesmanlike. He understood the decision and agreed that we needed to focus on the future of our defense cooperation and not dwell on missile defense. When the U.S. delegation arrived to explain the decision just a few hours later, the Czech side circulated a paper entitled "Beyond the Missile Defense Review."

¶12. (C) Comment: During the visit of Vice President Biden, Fischer was very engaging and effusive in his support for mutual cooperation. At the press conference that followed the meeting, Fischer even went beyond his scripted remarks calling the U.S. an important ally and expressing his desire to move forward on security and other issues. Even though Fischer greeted VP Biden at the airport upon arrival (usually enough), he came to the airport to see Biden off and joined the conversation Biden was having with former President Vaclav Havel and spent nearly another hour with both of them. After departure, Fischer sincerely thanked the Charge d'Affaires for organizing the trip, commenting about its

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success. It was clear from the meetings and his remarks to the Charge that Fischer likes the U.S. and wants to foster an even stronger bilateral relationship.

¶12. (C) It is no surprise that Fischer is so popular with Czechs, as he is perceived as responsible and trustworthy. He is, however, still dependent on the support of the two major parties and must be mindful of the two leaders - Topolanek and Paroubek - who put him in power. If his policies or governing fails to reconcile with ODS and CSSD leaders and their goals, he could easily find that he no longer enjoys their confidence. But Topolanek and Paroubek must also be careful, for they are far less popular than Fischer and would suffer from ousting him for no good reason.

End Comment.
Thompson-Jones